THE PARKIN BACKFIRE

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In September 2005, the Australian government arrested and deported Scott Parkin, a visiting US peace activist. This caused a storm of protest and greatly stimulated community interest in nonviolent action and threats to civil liberties. The Parkin case shows how an injustice can backfire and how activists can use an understanding of backfire dynamics to be more effective.

Scott,[1] a part-time community college instructor from Houston, Texas, came to Australia in June for a holiday. An experienced peace activist, he set aside some time on the trip to meet with local activists, attend some actions and help run some workshops.

As co-founder of a grassroots group called Houston Global Awareness, Scott has been a vocal opponent of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. He has also been a prominent critic of the firm Halliburton, which has massive military contracts in Iraq and whose former head, Dick Cheney, is now US Vice-President.

Crucially, Scott is one of many activists around the world who promote and use nonviolent methods such as rallies, vigils, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and fasts in order to challenge repression and oppression. Nonviolent action was instrumental in toppling repressive regimes such as in the Philippines in 1986, in Eastern Europe in 1989, in Indonesia in 1998 and in Serbia in 2000 (Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Sharp 1973, 2005). Sometimes called 'people power,' nonviolent action is a tool that those with less formal power can use against injustice of any sort.

Scott, to his surprise and dismay, was arrested by Australian Federal Police on 10 September, detained in jail for five days and then deported. Why? Government spokespeople wouldn't say precisely, only that intelligence agencies believed that Scott represented a 'threat to national security.'

To lots of people, the government's treatment of Scott was transparently unjust. Outrage was apparent, for example, in letters to the editor (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2005). Although the government did not need to use anti-terrorist powers in order to deport Scott, his treatment showed the sort of thing that might be in store for others.

Scott's Australian friends and fellow activists sprang into action, holding protests in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Cairns. Activists in Brisbane, for example, marched to the police building offering to be arrested as threats to national security. Networks of support were also activated in the United States, with small protests taking place in San Francisco and New York.

It is fair to say that Scott's arrest and deportation backfired against the government. It generated negative media coverage for the government in Australia and internationally (Parkin 2005; SourceWatch 2005), alienated many members of the public and threw into question the rationale for new anti-terrorist laws about to be introduced. Finally, Scott's arrest and deportation gave new energy to the Australian nonviolence movement, presumably the very opposite of what this action was intended to achieve.[2]

The Parkin saga can be usefully understood in terms of backfire dynamics (Jansen and Martin 2004; Martin 2004; Martin and Gray 2005; Martin and Wright 2003). The two key conditions for backfire are a perception of injustice and communication to receptive audiences. Perpetrators predictably use various techniques to inhibit public outrage, which can be conveniently grouped into five main methods:

- cover-up of the action;
- devaluation of the target;
- reinterpretation of the event;
- use of official channels to give the appearance of justice;
- intimidation and bribery.

To increase the chance of backfire, it's valuable to counter each of these five methods. Accordingly, we look in turn at struggles in these five areas.

Cover-up and exposure

The first method of inhibiting outrage is to cover up the action, such as when torture is carried out in secret.

Scott was arrested in Melbourne on 10 September, while leaving a cafe, by four plain-clothes police officers and two immigration officials. Scott had stopped at the cafe on route to a nonviolence workshop he planned to co-present; it would appear that police followed him from the house where he was staying in order to arrest him while he was away from people who knew him, thereby lowering the risk of exposure.

The first person that Scott contacted after he was arrested was Iain Murray (co-author of this article), a member of the Melbourne nonviolence group Pt'chang and coordinator of its Nonviolence Training Project. Murray went immediately to the police station where Scott was held and began contacting others. Civil liberties organisations, sympathetic lawyers and NGOs such as Greenpeace were also contacted.

Soon, a small crowd of friends and supporters had assembled outside the police station, showing that lots of people were aware of Scott's situation and upset about his treatment. They also encouraged people to ring the

station asking about his welfare.

Shortly after his arrest, Scott was transferred to a high-security prison facility. There, his ability to communicate with supporters or the media was curtailed by a ban on phone calls and severe visiting restrictions.

The next day, some of the protesters issued a media release about Scott's detention. The media response was immediate, massive and largely sympathetic. Cover-up totally failed.

Devaluation and validation

The second method to inhibit outrage from an attack is to denigrate the targets, for example by labelling them 'terrorists.'

In response to questioning by journalists, Attorney-General Philip Ruddock said that it was the role of ASIO, which had assessed Scott as a threat to national security, to protect Australians from political violence. While some media reports said that Ruddock had accused Scott of 'inciting political violence,' this wasn't literally correct. In essence, Ruddock tarred Scott by association.

But suggesting that Scott was linked with political violence did not succeed, because he was too well known as a peace activist who was committed to nonviolence. Devaluation also failed.

Scott's allies always referred to him, in media interviews, as their friend, and told journalists of his opposition to violence. They contacted his US friends and nonviolence trainers he had worked with during his Australian visit, asking them to write statements of support. Three of Scott's fellow trainers travelled to Canberra, the national capital, to hold an impromptu 'Scott Parkin School of Peace' in Parliament House at the invitation of Senator Kerry Nettle.

When Scott was deported, his supporters contacted the media and assembled at Melbourne Airport with flowers, balloons and placards reading 'Thanks for your nonviolent work, Scott!' But the Government foiled this attempt to humanise Scott by sneaking him onto the plane through a back route.

A week after Scott was deported, he was smeared in a front-page story in *The Australian* under the title 'Deported activist was to teach tactics of violence' (Sheridan and Kerin 2005). The article claimed that Scott 'had been planning to instruct demonstrators in tactics including disabling police horses and springing arrested protesters from custody.' The authors of the article claimed not to have been able to contact Scott; they apparently did not seek comment from his friends in the nonviolence movement.

Scott immediately issued a media release countering these claims, explaining that he opposed any action that might hurt animals and had spoken out against techniques to de-arrest protesters. Without credible evidence or backing, the story appeared to enhance backfire against the Government as commentators speculated on the nature of the story's anonymous source.

Interpretation struggles

The third method for inhibiting outrage from injustice is to reinterpret the action, such as when civilian casualties are said to be accidents, exaggerated or someone else's fault.

The government's only attempt at explaining its actions was to say that ASIO had made an independent decision on national security grounds, but for security reasons the actual reason for ASIO's assessment on Scott could not be revealed. In other words, the government would not explain why Scott had been arrested and deported.

Ruddock stated on national radio that in the previous year ASIO had made nearly 45,000 security assessments of individuals, of which only three were adverse, 'But the assessments, whether positive or adverse, are never made known publicly' (ABC 2005).

In the absence of credible information from the government, observers could and did easily interpret the treatment of Scott as a blatant abuse of power. In the struggle over interpretations, the government was hardly in the game, and lost badly.

Official channels

The fourth method commonly used by attackers is to soothe concern by using official channels, such as inquiries or courts, that give the appearance of justice but seldom with much substance. Inquiries into issues such as Aboriginal deaths in custody give the appearance of official action, but when the recommendations languish the main effect is to diffuse public concern through lengthy procedures.

In Scott's case, official channels were the very means by which he was attacked. While the Attorney-General told the media that Scott could challenge the decision in the courts, officials told him, falsely, that an appeal would prolong his detention. Furthermore, in an

appeal, the government could use its powers to prevent giving reasons for its actions, for security reasons.

Scott decided to exercise his right to appeal, while consenting to his removal from Australia. Even so, he was charged A$11,700 for costs incurred, including approximately $155 per night for his detention plus his airfare to the US and airfares for two agents to accompany him.

The official channels used against Scott had little credibility in the wider public and did nothing to stop the backlash against the government. When Scott arrived in Los Angeles, he was once again free: US authorities seemed to have none of the security concerns that had alarmed ASIO. This inconsistency helped to undermine the Australian government's action.

After Scott's deportation, it was reported that ASIO's handling of the Parkin case would be investigated by the official body that oversees Australia's intelligence agencies. Because this review was to be carried out in secret, it had little potential for giving a greater appearance of justice.

Instead of relying on official channels, Scott's supporters chose to confront decision makers publicly and directly, in accordance with Scott's commitment to nonviolent direct action. Ruddock found himself facing a room full of supporters wearing handcuffs and Gandhi masks at a function in Melbourne, and one of Scott's friends demanded answers from Prime Minister John Howard on live talkback radio.

Intimidation, bribery and resistance

The fifth and final method to inhibit outrage is intimidation and bribery. Scott was arrested by six officers and held in solitary confinement for days without access to his friends and family. This sort of treatment certainly can be intimidating. Lawyer Julian Burnside said that Scott had been told by immigration officers that if he withdrew his appeal — to find out why his visa had been revoked — his deportation date would be sooner. This could be classified as attempted bribery (Hogan 2005).

Despite the intimidation, Scott made the crucial decision to contact a trusted friend, who mobilised other friends and supporters, who in turn alerted the media and organised further protests. These allies of Scott were willing to resist, with the result that intimidation and bribery did not succeed in limiting outrage.

Conclusion

The government tried all five methods of inhibiting outrage from its treatment of Scott, but none of them worked very well. Cover-up failed because Scott contacted his friend, who then mobilised others. Attempts to slander Scott had little credibility because of his commitment to nonviolence. The government did little to explain its actions, so that the dominant interpretation was that they were a blatant attack on civil liberties. After bad publicity, the government did not use any formal procedures to give an impression of fairness. Finally, intimidation and bribery failed, most importantly because Scott had allies who were willing to act, and the media were not afraid to publish the story.

The result was that Scott's arrest and deportation backfired on the government. This is most obvious through the surge of interest and support amongst the peace movement, the apparent target of the government's action.

On the email list nonviolencenet, there were inspiring reports of actions and increased interest. From Cairns, Queensland, Bryan Law reported that, 'activist response was extraordinary for our town. ... People showed up to this action who have never turned out before for one of our peace actions.' Louise Cook-Tonkin from Castlemaine, Victoria, reported that, 'In our small town a group has come out of the woodwork to begin a street theatre group on the topic!'

The scale of backfire was also apparent by the number of letters to the editor, editorials, cartoons and scathing articles. For example, Paul Gray in a newspaper article titled 'Fascists taking control' wrote 'We can all sleep safer in our beds knowing a notorious peace campaigner, Scott Parkin, has been deported to America by the Howard Government. Whew! One less troublesome puppeteer wearing out our footpaths. ... Is this really the best John Howard can do to fight terrorism? The Government says Parkin's deportation is to protect our national security. In reality, it's an act of political censorship.' (Gray 2005). The whole affair became an embarrassment for those who initiated it.

In many ways, the Parkin saga is similar to many other cases of backfire, but there is an important difference. Normally, perpetrators find that secrecy helps to prevent outrage, by aiding in cover-up of the injustice. In the way it went about arresting and detaining Scott, the government tried to limit publicity. But after the story got out, secrecy actually hindered the government's options for limiting outrage. Because ASIO's assessment of Scott was secret, the government could not give a convincing explanation for its actions: it appeared only to be covering up. Furthermore, it could not slander Scott as effectively as it might otherwise have done. The attack on Scott in *The Australian* presumably relied on a leak from ASIO, which in principle involved a security violation. Official channels could not easily be used to dampen public concern because security regulations limited publicity. Therefore, after Scott's treatment became known, the government's obsession with secrecy ironically constrained what it could do to reduce backfire.

The case illustrates that backfire is much more likely when the target of attack is explicitly committed to nonviolence. Numerous historical cases show that

nonviolent discipline is vital in causing attacks to rebound against the attacker (Sharp 1973, 573-655). Scott's commitment to nonviolence made it clear to nearly all observers that he was not a terrorist — indeed, his approach was an alternative to terrorism. This made it far more difficult for the government to discredit him and to explain its actions as anything other than heavy-handed political censorship.

The Parkin case not only demonstrates backfire dynamics in action, but also represents a practical application of backfire analysis. Iain Murray, a key figure in mobilising actions in support of Scott, was familiar with the backfire framework[3] and used it — along with his activist instincts and knowledge of other nonviolence campaigns, such as *Otpor!* in Serbia[4] — in choosing and designing actions, such as efforts to validate Scott and counter attempts to discredit him.

It is not surprising that backfire analysis can be a guide for action. Gene Sharp's classification of methods of nonviolent action and his analysis of the dynamics of nonviolent action are a form of grounded theory, namely constructed from patterns apparent through familiarity with hundreds of cases of nonviolent struggle. Sharp's frameworks therefore are quite likely to serve as good guides for future nonviolent struggles. The backfire framework, itself an outgrowth of Sharp's concepts, is also grounded theory, built on examination of tactics used in a wide range of cases. In fact, it is through cases such as Scott's that backfire analysis can be tested, refined and, if necessary, revised or extended.

One important lesson from the Parkin saga, and from backfire analysis generally, is that attacks should not be feared but instead treated as opportunities. The Australian nonviolence movement contains quite a number of home-grown activists with tremendous skills and commitment. They received a boost from Scott's visit, but ironically an even greater boost from his exit.

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Bios

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Endnotes

1 Given our concern about validating the target of attack, henceforth we usually refer to 'Scott' rather than 'Parkin.'

2 The idea of backfire is based on Gene Sharp's concept of political jiu-jitsu. Sharp says that there are three groups that can be affected: the grievance group (in this case the nonviolence movement, civil liberties groups and others potentially targeted by the government's anti-terrorism powers), the attacker group (the government and its agencies) and third parties (the general public). There is clear evidence that the treatment of Parkin aroused concern among the nonviolence movement and the general public. Whether it caused any concern within the government and its agencies is unknown at this stage.

3 Brian Martin gave a workshop on backfire dynamics in Melbourne in November 2004, which Iain and other activists attended.

4 Otpor! was a movement in Serbia that led the nonviolent campaign that in 2000 ended Slobodan Milosevic's rule, as shown in the film *Bringing Down a Dictator.*

Attorney General Philip Ruddock was confronted by Scott's supporters at a speaking engagement. Credit: Anthony Bruzzese.

Photos from article 'The Parkin Backfire' by Brian Martin and Iain Murray p46-49.

Scott's supporters gather outside the Carlton West Police Station in Melbourne, shortly after his arrest. Credit: Rama Cronin.